

1998 News

continued

Dealing with mentally ill offenders

Recent tragic events have highlighted the problems encountered by law enforcement and the courts in dealing with mentally ill persons who commit crimes. When a mentally ill person is charged with a felony, the courts can detain that person for up to 180 days. When the person is charged with a misdemeanor, however, current law limits what prosecutors and the courts can do. If the person is found to be mentally incompetent, he or she usually must be released.

I was the only state representative appointed by County Executive Ron Sims to serve on the King County Mentally Ill Offender Task Force. The task force was formed following the brutal stabbing of retired firefighter Stanley Stevenson as he left a Mariners game with his family last summer. The proposal we developed focuses on the violent behavior of the individual rather than the category of the crime. Under the Task Force plan, a mentally ill person who commits a violent misdemeanor would have to be evaluated for mental health commitment and could be held for treatment. The proposal also changes the standards for civil commitment to allow us to treat mentally ill persons who have a history of violence.

Procedures for better enforcement of existing laws and improved communication among the jails, the courts and the mental health system are also part of the plan.

Spokane Street Viaduct targeted for major improvements

The Spokane Street Viaduct will undergo major improvements between Interstate 5 and Highway 99. Work is tentatively scheduled to begin in February 1998 and last throughout the year. The much-needed repairs will include restoring the concrete bridge deck, strengthening the viaduct for heavier traffic loads, and seismic retrofitting to strengthen the span and make it more likely to withstand the force of a major earthquake. The improvements will enhance the mobility of freight-laden trucks through the area and improve passenger vehicle safety.

The Spokane Street Viaduct is a critical link in our city's transportation system and a vital thoroughfare for those of us who live in West Seattle. As we who travel it know well, it has some of the heaviest traffic volumes of anywhere in the city — 63,000 vehicle trips per day. This volume, which includes a great deal of heavy truck and bus traffic, has resulted in the badly worn pavement that will be replaced as part of the project.

To minimize inconvenience to motorists, work will be done between the hours of 8:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., with one lane open for traffic. All lanes will be open between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Several weekend closures are anticipated as well. Information about the project is available from the City of Seattle Transportation Department at 684-5184.

Much, much more work is needed in the near future to truly untangle the transportation mess around and through the Duwamish industrial area. I will be working over the next two months to make the case in the Legislature that fixing our infuriating car/truck/train bottlenecks is good not just for West Seattle commuters, but for the economy of the entire state.

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EARLY EDITION

Representative
Dow Constantine

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January 1998

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

The 1998 legislative session began January 12 and is expected to last just 60 days, as established in the State Constitution. During that time, the Legislature should tackle several issues critical to the citizens of the 34th District and our state.

We must address problems that threaten the current economic health of the state and its people. These problems include gridlocked commuter and freight transportation, underfunded public schools, and a tax system that places too much of the burden on working families.

The test for the Legislature will be how well it stands up to the special interests and stands up for the interests of Washington's working families. Good government means responsibly seizing the opportunity in these good times to put our house in order: to invest in our future through our schools; to get serious about fixing our transportation mess; to save for the rainy day that will surely come.

I look forward to hearing your views on these and other important issues as the session progresses.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dow Constantine".

DOW CONSTANTINE

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Invest state surplus to meet needs save for future

Heading into the 1998 Legislative Session, the state operating budget is in good shape. By the end of the current two-year budget cycle, revenues should exceed spending by \$861 million. Of this amount, \$513 million will be carried forward as is a reserve from the 1995-97 budget. We should carefully steward these funds to help avoid both budget shortfalls and increased taxes during any future economic downturn.

The remaining \$348 million is new revenue above the state's \$19.1 billion budget. Proposals for this money include refunding cash to individual taxpayers or reducing the vehicle license tab fee. Each of these proposals would provide an average break of roughly \$35 to \$70.

Alternatively, many of you have suggested to me that any surplus revenues be invested for critical local needs including education, transportation, environment, and helping people get off welfare and into jobs. I agree with those priorities.

Whatever the outcome of the budget debate, I oppose a repeat performance of the last three years, which saw over \$1 billion in tax breaks granted by the Legislature of which 80 percent went to special interests. If tax breaks are going to be on the menu, relief for homeowners - not wealthy special interests - must be at the top of the list.

Education must become the top priority

The Legislature must address declining funding for our children's education. Adjusted for inflation, this year's funding is \$68 less per student than last year, and next year's funding will be \$101 less per student than last year —\$261 less than in 1993! If our teachers are to do the job we expect of them, we must provide them the resources.

Two good ideas to help students and teachers - the Washington Reading Corps and Excellent Educators proposals - will be considered this year. The Reading Corps would provide tutoring for 82,000 students in grades two through five, using paid and volunteer teachers and tutors. This would give children who are lagging in reading the extra help they need to improve their skills.

The Excellent Educators program is designed to attract, prepare and reward teaching excellence. It includes a \$3,000 bonus for any teacher who earns the prestigious National Teacher Certification.

Property taxes are skyrocketing

Families in the 34th District communities are struggling with rising property taxes due to skyrocketing housing prices. Income that could be used for kids' clothes, college tuition, retirement savings or other family expenses must instead be spent on escalating tax bills to keep the family home. Because of the red-hot housing market, homeowners are carrying a greater share of the total tax burden than in the past. Certainly property taxes pay for critical public services like schools, libraries, and emergency medical services. But most family budgets can be stretched only so far.

I am introducing legislation to free homeowners from paying state property tax, which amounts to roughly 25 percent of your total property-tax bill, on the first \$50,000 of property valuation — a savings of \$160 every year, permanently. This legislation could only take effect if voters pass a constitutional amendment.

Preventing Driving Under the Influence (DUI)

Lawmakers and the public have lost patience with drunk drivers and the tragedies they inflict on innocent victims and their families. This year, statutes governing DUI offenses and penalties will be strengthened. Several proposals are on the table to:

- Increase penalties upon conviction
- Lower the limit for blood alcohol concentration (BAC) from .10 to .08
- Suspend a drunk driver's license for 90 days immediately upon arrest
- Provide for vehicle forfeiture for repeat offenders
- Limit deferred prosecution to once in a lifetime
- Require ignition "interlocks" to prevent repeat violations

In fact, on the opening day of the session I had the privilege of speaking in support of a bill to allow the impoundment of the vehicles of those found to be driving with a suspended license. Many such offenders lost their licenses because of drunken driving convictions.

The most effective step that we could take is one that will likely not be taken this session - better funding for police, prosecutors, courts and jails, to allow every case to be handled with the attention it deserves.



**Rep. Constantine confers with Rep. Frank Chopp,
Floor Leader, during floor debate.**

Protecting salmon and steelhead

At least seven salmon and steelhead stocks are likely to be listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act within the next two years. This not only reflects the decline of a vital natural resource, but the possibility of federal intervention, which would pose a risk of serious disruption to Washington's economy. A multi-pronged approach is being proposed to address declining stocks, including removing barriers that block salmon habitat; addressing water quality, quantity and fish habitat issues; providing landowners with incentives to restore and protect critical habitat; funding enforcement to prevent poaching and habitat destruction; and buying back commercial fishing licenses.

Governor Locke is proposing formation of a new Governor's Salmon Team to develop a statewide salmon conservation strategy and bring these important efforts under a single umbrella.

Helping residents affected by Sea-Tac Airport

Along with my fellow legislators from the 33rd and 34th districts, I am supporting legislation to ensure that the cities of Burien, Des Moines, Normandy Park and Sea-Tac are treated fairly in dealings over environmental conditions at Sea-Tac airport. More than 20 violations related to pollution of our environment have been recorded in the last five years and the Port has been assessed \$27,000 in fines in just the past two years. This money goes into the state general fund rather than to the communities damaged by the operations. This law needs to be changed so the communities damaged by airport violations are compensated.

Long-time homeowners have seen a decline in their property values due to increased operations at Sea-Tac Airport. It adds insult to injury to force the residents most affected by the airport to pay property taxes to the Port of Seattle to fund the continued expansion of the flights over their houses. This session I am also supporting a bill that would exempt homeowners in a 55 LDN noise level from paying property taxes to the Port of Seattle. This would include parts of Des Moines, Burien, Normandy Park, Sea-Tac and Tukwila. Citizens around the airport pay with their property values and their quality of life every single day — they already bear more than their fair share of airport costs.

Ferry system sinking under weight of Kitsap growth

The ferry system was originally intended as a temporary service until a system of cross-sound bridges could be built. In 1959, and several times thereafter, the Legislature and other official bodies have wisely rejected plans to build cross-sound bridges. A bridge linking Vashon to the mainland would destroy both Vashon and the community at the other end. So ferries will be with us indefinitely. But exploding growth on the Kitsap peninsula is causing increased traffic through the Southworth dock. This is making the crossing much more difficult for Vashon residents, and is placing an unreasonable traffic burden on the residents of Fauntleroy.

The ferry system's long-range plan is to direct more ferry service from Kitsap County/Southworth directly to the Coleman Dock in downtown Seattle, rather than through Vashon and Fauntleroy. I will do everything I can to move this process along. Plans also call for dedicating a passenger-only ferry solely to the Vashon-Coleman run.

As new Jumbo Mark II ferries are finished and put into service on the Seattle-Bainbridge run and points north, a 100-car Issaquah-class vessel will replace a 75-car Steel electric class vessel. The temporary up-sizing of boats on the Vashon-Fauntleroy run last summer will become a permanent, year-round operation beginning in May of this year.

During the first week of session I, along with my fellow 34th District legislators, met with Kitsap County legislators who have tried to give Southworth passengers preference over Vashon passengers. We were able to reach agreement to instead work together for better service for all concerned, including the improvements mentioned above.